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# THE TOUCHSTONE OF BELIEF

BY EDWARD S. MARTIN

MR. HERBERT E. MILES contributed to the October number of the *Atlantic Monthly* the correspondence on religion between himself and John Burroughs, and contributed to THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW of the same month the article "Shall Progress Reach the Bible?" They are in a way connected contributions, because the same reflections and aspirations that caused Mr. Miles to seek the correspondence with Mr. Burroughs, led him also to publish in this magazine the article about the reconstruction of the Bible.

It will be found that Mr. Burroughs in the *Atlantic* letters dissented very heartily from Christianity, which he described as a whining, simpering, sentimental religion, and announced himself a Pantheist, whose only God was the one he saw daily and hourly about him, and is identical with nature. He seemed to have the idea that the Christian God was antagonistic to creation and the development of life. Christianity, he said, turns its back on nature and relegates it to the devil. Mr. Miles was distressed at these views, and the correspondence is the record of an effort, not very successful, to bring Mr. Burroughs to a better understanding of Christianity. Mr. Miles apparently believes that Mr. Burroughs was hindered from such an understanding by some things that are in the Bible, and he certainly believes that many other people are so hindered, because his proposal is for a revision and rearrangement of the Bible, which would remove objections to it which he believes to be reasonable, and help to bring into association with the churches fifty million people in the United States who now have no such association.

Of course, he would leave out a good deal, including what he calls "the offensive sex-narratives of Genesis", and the "obsolete and confused ritual regulations of Leviticus and Deuteronomy", and "Jonah and similar pure fiction; accounts of fierce and

savage warfares, and endless genealogies," and there should be, he says, "a decided condensation of the Prophets and a more accurate rendering of the Psalms." Then his new Bible would have a first part, called perhaps "The Hebrew Foundation," to include all that is best of the Old Testament and remain in the language of the revised version, and that part which he calls "Legend" when retained should be put as Legend, cherished for its literary and historical value, its holiness removed.

The second part, practically the New Testament, he would divide into three parts; the first of them, which he rates as of least value, being the accounts of the miraculous in the life of Christ, including the stories of His birth, miracles, and ascension. It would probably be agreed, he says, that all the demonology and other questionable beliefs common to the day in which the writers of Christ's life lived can be left out. This part, he thinks, might be called "The Accounts of the Miraculous."

The next part would be the rest of the New Testament with the omissions indicated, and perhaps with the four Gospels consolidated, which he would call "The Ministry of Christ", and the third part, in modern English, would be a recapitulation, which he would call "Christian Principles". For this work of revision and reconstruction he thinks there might be a high commission of ten men, including four clergymen and two laymen of the Protestant Churches and four outside the Church to represent the millions of agnostics, and to this number, if the Roman Catholic Church should find itself interested, two more might be added to represent it.

The Bible has been in existence and use a long time and has seen and survived a good deal of progress and could probably survive this particular step of progress, which Mr. Miles suggests, without harm. If a dozen respected men can be induced to make the revision, omissions and changes that he recommends, and the result of their labors is published, there would be no objection that I know of for putting it out in competition with the Bible as we know it now. That it should supersede our present Bible is inconceivable, and that it should appreciably affect its circulation is very unlikely.

The Bible is an altogether extraordinary book. What anyone finds in it depends upon what he knows already. Mr. Miles seems not to have got below its surface. He himself believes a good deal. He believes in immortality, and in the invisible world, and in God, but the Bible as it stands is the record of God's dealing with men, and is largely concerned with the invisible world, and is the book to which people turn who are concerned about that world and their relations with it. In such matters most people prefer the original documents on which accepted beliefs are based, and in the Bible as it is they come pretty near to getting them.

Christianity in nineteen centuries has very likely gone off a good deal from its primitive vigor and faith, but the Bible has not gone off at all. It is just what it was. A church council in very early times declared which of the books of religion were authoritative, and what witnesses could be trusted. It sifted the material for the New Testament and gave us what we have. Mr. Miles seems to think that it did not do much of a job, but the dissent from that opinion will be very lively and comprehensive.

Mr. Miles seems disposed to revise the Bible in a way to make it more acceptable to agnostics. He cannot do that and not make it less acceptable and less useful to believers. The more people know, and the more they believe, about the invisible world and the things with which religion is most concerned, the less disposed they will be to have the Bible disemboweled and pared down to suit people who believe less. As it stands, it is the great touchstone of belief. The world just now is full of spiritism. A good many people think they are in communication with the unseen world, and for many of them the test of what they think they know is whether it squares with what they find in the Bible. If they find spiritism in the Bible, they have more confidence that it is a living force to-day. Mr. Miles thinks that "all demonology and other questionable beliefs common to the day in which the writers of Christ's life lived" might be left out by general agreement. He seems to think that such beliefs are generally understood to be fallacious or unimportant. The dissent from that opinion would be very

vigorous indeed and he would find a strong existing conviction that the only trouble about the beliefs common to the day in which the writers of Christ's life lived is that in a materialistic world they have grown faint, though for many Christians the Bible has preserved them.

There is another thing. Parts of the Bible are pretty old and are derived from writings still older. In them are echoes of pre-historic times which are of great interest and value to students who try to learn what this world and human life were like in days long gone, and where the peoples came from whom we know. Somebody in Toronto, for example, has just published a book to prove that the English and most of the Americans are descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel, and represent Ephraim and Manasseh. The theory is not novel, but the way this inquirer digs up the Bible to prove it is highly entertaining, even though not conclusively convincing, and of course for such investigations as that a sawed off, bored out and expurgated Bible would not do at all.

Mr. Miles's suggestions imply that he thinks that the men of our day know enough to decide what belongs to knowledge and what does not. But they do not. They have merely nibbled at knowledge, and the understanding of spiritual things is hardly more complete than chemistry or physics. What we find in the Bible depends, as said, on what we have learned to understand, and the more understanding advances the more the Bible yields to qualified readers.

However, Mr. Miles's project will take care of itself. It is not dangerous. When one has stated his suggestion, that is really all that is necessary.

EDWARD S. MARTIN.